advice and support for older age
Independent Age

If you're feeling lonely

How to stay connected in older age

Thank you

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The sources used to create this publication are available on request.

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About this guide

Most of us will feel lonely at some point. Being alone doesn't always mean you'll feel lonely – people often choose to spend time alone and enjoy their own company. Others may feel lonely even when surrounded by people. Loneliness is the feeling of sadness that can come from not having the social contact you would like.

Some common experiences of older age could make you more likely to feel lonely. For example, adult children may have moved away, friends or partners may have died, and health problems may make it harder to get out and see others.

Loneliness is a personal experience and people find different ways to overcome these feelings. This guide has advice on simple things to try which could help reduce loneliness, and information on where to look for more help.

We spoke to people about their experiences of coping with loneliness. Their quotes appear throughout.

In this guide you'll find references to our other publications. You can order them by calling 0800 319 6789 or visiting independentage.org/publications.

Why am I lonely?

Loneliness just creeps up on you. None of us think it will happen to us, but suddenly it's there – you're on your own.

People feel lonely for all sorts of reasons. Sometimes, a particular event or change in circumstances may trigger these feelings, or you may have felt lonely for a long time without really knowing why.

You might find yourself feeling lonely if:

- a close relative or friend has died
- you have lost contact with friends or family
- a relationship has broken down
- you no longer work and miss the social contact this provided
- you live alone
- you've moved to a new country or area

- you have an illness which makes you feel isolated from others, either emotionally or because it makes it hard for you to get out
- you're caring for someone and don't have much opportunity to socialise
- you don't feel close to those around you
- you're living on a low income and can't afford to socialise as much as you'd like
- you don't feel supported by your relationships
- you have one close relationship but have lost touch with others
- you're shy or have social anxiety
- you're feeling depressed.

These are just a few examples of why people feel lonely. Your loneliness may not have a direct cause and you don't need to look for one.

However, it could help to be aware of when you're feeling lonely. You may find you feel lonely on certain days or at certain times, or that particular things trigger these feelings. For example, many people find Sunday the loneliest day because of its traditional reputation as a day to spend with family. If you're aware of what brings on your loneliness, you can try to change things to improve this.

On Saturday, I was here all by myself, it was pouring with rain, not a great deal on the telly to amuse you – never is on a Saturday – and I got really down. I could have just sat and cried.

You could try keeping a simple journal to record how you're feeling at different times in the week. Think about things you've enjoyed, things you've found difficult and whether certain days or times of day are better than others:

Sunday lunchtime – I cooked myself lunch. Felt sad that I wasn't having a roast dinner with family like I used to.

Try keeping the journal for a week and see if there's one thing you could change to make a difference. For example, if you find you're loneliest at the weekend because family aren't available to chat, consider signing up for a weekend event like Contact the Elderly's monthly Sunday tea parties (0800 716543, contact-the-elderly.org.uk). Or if you feel better on days when you've done a certain activity – such as cooking yourself a nice meal or taking a walk – try to do that regularly.

Thinking about yourself

I live entirely alone; I have no family. That takes a lot of thinking about, doesn't it – I am entirely alone. Life is really what I make it.

When you're lonely, especially if you've been feeling that way for a while, it can be hard to reach out. You might worry that others won't understand you or want to spend time with you. Learning to feel comfortable with yourself and increase your self-confidence can be an important first step. Sometimes, you may need to address underlying feelings and anxieties before trying to spend more time with others. Otherwise, simply increasing the amount of social contact you have may not change how you feel, at least in the short-term.

If your confidence is low, engaging with other people can be particularly difficult. Try to challenge negative thoughts and remember to be kind to

yourself. You might want to make a list of things you like about yourself or that other people have complimented you on. You may find this difficult or silly to start with, but it can be a useful tool. It can help you to understand yourself and what you value, as well as increasing your confidence.

5 skills I have

1. I can play 10 different card games
2. I am a good listener
3.
4.
5.

5 things that went well this week

1. I made a really good omelette
2. I went for a nice walk by the canal
3.
4.
5.

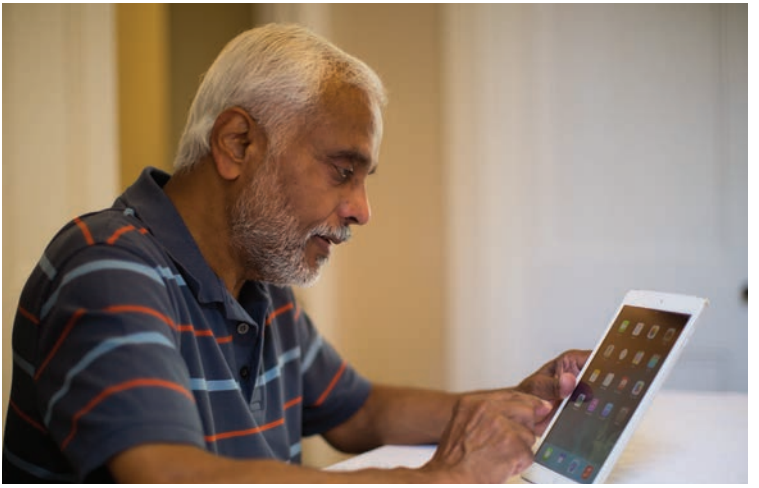
5 things other people have admired about me

1. The postman said I'm always smiling
2. My cousin said it was so nice that I'd written to ask how she was after her operation
3.
4.
5.

If you're feeling bad about yourself or anxious about how to change things, cognitive behaviour therapy (CBT) could help. This is a process which teaches you to break negative or unhelpful thought patterns. It can help you to challenge assumptions like 'No one will want to talk to me' or 'I've been lonely for so long – nothing will change'. There are a number of self-help books and online resources available which use this approach. You might also be referred for a short course of guided CBT or another form of therapy by your GP. You could try:

- The **Overcoming** series of self-help books, recommended by the Royal College of Psychiatrists. Titles include **Overcoming Anxiety** and **Overcoming Low Self-Esteem** – nhs.uk/Conditions/stress-anxiety-depression/Pages/Self-help-therapies.aspx#books has more information, or they're available from libraries and bookshops.
- Moodzone (nhs.uk/moodzone) – an NHS online service with mood self-assessment tools and advice on how to deal with common mental health concerns, like low mood, low confidence and anxiety.

Self-help isn't right for everyone. If you think you need some support, speak to your GP.



If you're feeling very anxious or depressed or struggling to control your feelings of loneliness, talk to your GP or call a helpline like Samaritans (116 123) to talk about what's worrying you. There are also organisations that can help with specific problems, such as:

- Cruse Bereavement Care (0808 808 1677, cruse.org.uk)
- Relate for relationship counselling (0300 100 1234, relate.org.uk)
- The Silver Line (0800 4 70 80 90, thesilverline.org.uk) – a helpline specifically for older people, providing emotional support and advice.

Although loneliness and depression are distinct experiences, the two things are linked and loneliness can lead to depression. Our guide **Dealing with depression** has more information about where to go for help and things you can do to help yourself stay mentally well.

Talking about how you're feeling

Opening up to others about how you're feeling can help you to feel less alone. If you have people around you but feel disconnected from them, try to talk to them about how you're feeling. It's easy to think that no one understands or cares what you're going through, but that's unlikely to be true. The vast majority of people have experienced loneliness, so should be able to empathise.

If you don't feel comfortable talking to people you know, you could try a support group instead. Many exist online and there may also be face-to-face groups in your area – ask your GP if they can recommend one, look at local adverts or search online. They may be for people with a certain illness or in a particular situation. For example:

- Mind (0300 123 3393, mind.org.uk/information-support/local-minds) offers support for anyone with mental health concerns
- Carers UK (0808 808 7777, carersuk.org/help-and-advice/get-support/local-support and carersuk.org/forum) offers support if you're caring for someone
- Macmillan (0808 808 00 00, macmillan.org.uk/information-and-support/coping/talking-about-cancer) offers support to people affected by cancer
- Parkinson's UK (0808 800 0303, parkinsons.org.uk/information-and-support/local-groups) offers support to people affected by Parkinson's.

It can be really reassuring to talk to people who can empathise with you and have had similar experiences.

I have been living alone for the last 13 years and feel very lonely, which is not a good feeling. The Community Network groups have been fantastic – talking on the phone with others about my situation really helps. I have made new friends who I intend to stay in contact with. Picking up the phone once a week for an hour has really revitalised my life.

Looking for opportunities

Start by thinking about your current friends, family and acquaintances. Are there people you would like to talk to but have fallen out of contact with, or people who you would like to get to know better? If the idea of a face-to-face meeting or phone call feels too daunting, you could send them a letter or email. Sometimes just thinking about the people you know, who care about you, could help you to feel less isolated.

If you don't have an existing group of people you're close to, think about the people you encounter in your day-to-day life. There may be opportunities to make new acquaintances this way. Perhaps you could say hello to a neighbour if you see them

outside or chat to the newsagent who sells you your daily newspaper. You don't have to be close to someone for a conversation to be meaningful. Any encounter has the potential to make you feel more connected to those around you, even if it doesn't develop into a long-lasting friendship. As a first step, just being around other people without talking to them can help you to feel more connected. You could try going to the local park, a cinema, café or public event.

If people don't always respond to you, don't take it personally. You're making a conscious effort to connect with other people, but they could have their minds on other things. Maybe they've had a bad day or are very busy. If one person rebuffs you, don't shy away from everyone. If you take every opportunity to smile or say hello, you're more likely to get a positive response from someone.

Try setting yourself targets for the week and building up slowly:

This week I will...	Achieved?
• Phone Ann for a chat	✓
• Say hello to the new neighbours	✓

Overcoming practical barriers

There are many reasons why you may find it difficult to connect with people in the way you want to. Some of these might relate to how you're feeling, but others might be about the practical problems of getting out and about. It's worth thinking about what your practical barriers are, as you may find help is available to get round these difficulties. For example:

I've given up driving. How can I get around?

You could see if your area has a Dial-a-Ride scheme, which offers door-to-door transport to people who can't use public transport. Contact your local council or the Community Transport Association (0161 351 1475, ctonline.org.uk/search/england). If you can use public transport, make sure you take advantage of discounts for over-60s – for example, you could purchase a Senior Railcard or Coachcard for a third off most train or coach journeys – and claim your free bus pass once you reach the qualifying age. Our free guide **Behind the wheel** has other suggestions for getting around without a car.

I don't have the money to go out with my friends.

Make sure you're claiming all the benefits you're entitled to. Pension Credit is one that is very under-claimed and you just need to call the Pension Service on 0800 99 1234 to check if you qualify. Or call our Helpline on 0800 319 6789 to make an appointment for a full benefit check or use our online benefit calculator (independentage.org/benefit-calculator). Our free guide **Moneywise** has lots of tips on boosting your income. Going out doesn't have to be expensive – community groups and charities may offer free events near you. Remember to ask about age-related discounts when you go out too, for example at the theatre or cinema.

My wife needs 24-hour care. I just can't leave the house.

Caring for someone can be very isolating. Ask your local council for a free carer's assessment as soon as possible. The council has a duty to carry this out for anyone who is an unpaid carer for a relative or friend. It looks at what support you need in your caring role and how you can get it (0800 319 6789, independentage.org/support-for-carers). Carer support groups can also be a great source of help – see page 13. You should also ask for a care needs assessment for the person you care for if they haven't had one recently.

Your physical health

Loneliness and isolation can have a severe impact on your health, so make sure you're looking after yourself. Eating sensibly, getting enough sleep and being active can all have a positive effect on your outlook and sense of wellbeing as well as your physical health. Try to avoid drinking too much alcohol, as this can make you feel more depressed. You can use a journal – see chapter 1 – to keep track of what you do and what you eat, and the impact this has on how you feel.

Being unwell, particularly with a long-term illness, can lead to isolation. You may have a disability which makes it hard for you to get out, or think that others don't understand how you're feeling or what you're capable of. If you have friends and family around you, try to talk to them about how you're feeling. They may be able to help you get the companionship you need, or just provide reassurance that they're sympathetic to what you're going through. There are also many support groups for people affected by illnesses or conditions. They can be an invaluable source of encouragement and moral support – see chapter 2.

4 Ways to stay in touch

There are a lot of ways to stay in touch these days, even if you find it hard to leave your home. Phone calls can be very satisfying, but if it's hard to find a good time to ring relatives, try emailing them or sending a text message or letter instead. If you've lost touch with old friends, try using a social networking site like Facebook to reconnect.

When you've become socially isolated, for whatever reason, it can be hard to make contact with people again – finding a means of communication that really works for you can help nudge you back into the habit of staying in touch.

Hazel's story

Hazel bought her first computer 13 years ago after her husband died. She says, "I was feeling a bit lonely and my daughter suggested I get a computer. I took computer courses through my local council. I went partly for the company, but mainly because I like learning new things. It's made a great difference because instead of just sitting at home watching television every night, I'm sat talking to friends online."

Online forums can be a great way to get in touch with people with similar interests. For example, Gransnet is a social networking site for over-50s. There are discussions on everything from genealogy to cooking and biscuit dunking.
If you've got a special interest, you could search for online forums related to that. Most forums will have rules, and advice on how to use them safely, but it's important to use common sense when talking to strangers online. Our webpage independentage.org/information/personal-life/staying-safe-online has useful tips.

If what you'd really like is face-to-face contact, then try to arrange that instead. It may be easier to phone someone, but it's important to get the type of social contact that will help you as well as the right amount.

Trying something new

Sometimes, the easiest way to break the cycle of loneliness is to meet new people. If you're trying to find new friends with whom you have more in common, you could join a group based on an interest or hobby, such as:

- a local choir or orchestra
- a painting or drawing class
- a community gardening group
- a walking or swimming group
- a reading group
- a dance or tai chi class
- an LGBT group
- services or groups at your place of worship.

These types of groups will exist in most areas, but be imaginative. If you've always fancied flower arranging or playing the ukulele, see what's available! If you'd like to learn or try something new, the University of the Third Age (U3A) has local centres in many areas, which offer a wide range of free or low-cost clubs and classes for older people (020 8466 6139, u3a.org.uk). You could also search online for courses on hotcourses.com. These are not free but there

may be concessions. Joining a group that keeps you active can be particularly beneficial, as exercise can boost your mood as well as keeping you in good health.

Look out for what is happening in your local area – there may be community events like village fairs you can get involved with, or talks offered by your local library. Your local council may also be able to recommend local day centres for older or disabled people, which will offer a range of activities. If you find it hard to get out or you live in an isolated area, try online groups instead. Many clubs will also have online equivalents – for example, there are a number of online reading groups.

One advantage of joining a group based around an activity is that there may be less pressure to speak to people immediately. Some groups might even let you sit in on a meeting before you join in. Take any new experiences at a pace that suits you. You may have to try a few things before you find one that suits you, and it can take time to build trust with any new people you meet.

That was the start – through the coffee morning. I felt like for the first time in 20 years I'd actually laughed! I had a smile. And I thought, this is brilliant – you know, maybe my wish is coming true.

6 Partners and loneliness

I am almost 88 but amazingly healthy and apparently appear much younger! I was widowed many years ago. My problem, really, is a feeling of redundancy. I have a good relationship with my three children and six grandchildren, but in some ways it would be unhealthy if they still needed me. I am not shy and am happy in a group but that is not what I need. I just want one person to care about and who cares about me.

For some people, the loss or lack of a partner can be the hardest thing to cope with. They may have a strong network of friends and family but find that they miss being part of a couple. This can be very hard, perhaps especially if you've

lost a partner and are adjusting to spending more time on your own. You may feel you want to put all your energy into finding someone new – however, it can help to focus on other aspects of your life too. Learning to be alone and to develop other interests and supportive relationships can help you to feel less lonely and increase your sense of self-worth, whether or not you're looking for a partner.

If you've lost a partner, it's normal to feel lonely and bereft. Give yourself time to come to terms with what has happened and how you're feeling. If you've been bereaved, grief causes many different feelings and may stay with you for a long time. Allow yourself the time you need to adjust. If you're feeling overwhelmed, Cruse Bereavement Care may be able to help (0808 808 1677, cruse.org.uk/bereavement-services/get-help). Our free guide **Coping with bereavement** has more advice on living with grief and loss.

Divorce is becoming more common among older people and there is less stigma attached to it these days. While it may be the best outcome when a relationship breaks down, it can also lead to loneliness. You may have lost some of your social networks, your relationships with your children may be affected and there can be a financial cost as well. It can take time to work through the issues that come with divorce and it may be helpful to talk to someone. An organisation such as Relate can help – you don't have to be in a relationship to seek advice (0300 100 1234, relate.org.uk/relationship-help/help-separation-and-divorce).

If you feel ready to start a new relationship, there are many ways to meet new people. Building close relationships can take time, so don't be disheartened if it doesn't happen immediately. If the idea of meeting someone new feels daunting, you might want to start by taking up a new hobby or activity. Joining a group activity would let you spend time with others and start to talk to them at a pace that suits you.

Some people try online dating – an increasingly popular way for people of all ages to meet new partners. This can be very convenient and is usually safe, but do be careful when giving out personal information or arranging to meet people for the first time. Mind, the mental health charity, has guides to **Staying well online** and **Taking relationships offline safely** (0300 123 3393, mind.org.uk/information-support/tips-for-everyday-living/online-safety-and-support). Our relationship webpages independentage.org/information/personal-life/relationships have more advice on dating and relationships in later life.

7 Learning to be alone

If you're feeling lonely, you may try to avoid spending time alone. However, being on your own is not the same as being lonely. Learning to feel comfortable with your own company can help you to feel less lonely even when you don't have others around you.

Spending time apart from others can be a liberating experience – you can use it to do things you enjoy. You might want to cultivate a new skill or indulge an interest your friends don't share. If you find it hard to relax or concentrate on what you're doing, you could try mindfulness (mind.org.uk/mindfulness). This is a form of meditation, where you focus your mind on the present moment. For instance, you might focus on your breathing. It's a useful tool to help manage your thoughts and feelings.

Some people compare themselves to others, and worry that they have a lonelier life than those around them. Try not to do this. One of the drawbacks of social media, such as Facebook, is that we seem to have a constant window into other people's lives. You may see pictures of

people surrounded by friends and family, but this doesn't show the full picture – people often only share the positive parts of their lives. Try to focus on yourself and how you are feeling rather than making comparisons. Not everyone needs the same number of companions or type of social contact.

If you want more companionship at home, you could consider getting a pet. Pets can provide unconditional love and company and many people find them very comforting. Having a dog that needs walking can also give you a reason to go outside and do something active. If you wouldn't be able to keep your own dog, you could help someone out by walking or looking after their dog through organisations like The Cinnamon Trust (01736 757 900, cinnamon.org.uk) or Borrow My Doggy (borrowmydoggy.com).

If it wasn't for my dogs, I don't think I could have come through it.

8 Helping others

Befriending is a vehicle to try and provide people with companionship – myself as well. I come away having a smile about the conversations we've had.

An Independent Age volunteer

Volunteering works both ways – you're helping other people or a cause you care about, but also consider what it can do for you. Most volunteers find it a very rewarding experience and it can be a great way to meet other people with similar interests. Some people find that their loneliness stems from a feeling that they're not needed. Choosing to do something that makes a difference challenges that perception and can make you feel less isolated.

Have a look at the volunteering opportunities available in your area – many of them won't require particular skills. For example:

- The Retired and Senior Volunteer Programme helps over-50s find opportunities to use their skills and experience in the community (020 3780 5870, volunteeringmatters.org.uk/pillars/older-people)
- Do-it.org lets you search for volunteering opportunities in your area, so is a good place to start if you're online
- Contact the Elderly hosts afternoon tea parties for over-75s. They need volunteer drivers and hosts, or you could sign up as a guest (0800 716543, contact-the-elderly.org.uk)
- Organisations such as Independent Age look for volunteers to make regular phone calls or visits to older people. You could sign up as a volunteer or request phone calls or visits for yourself (020 7605 4255, independentage.org/volunteer).

Case study

One of our Helpline advisers, Anna, says, "An 83-year-old woman called us for advice about her income and benefits. Her husband of 52 years had dementia and had moved to a care home a year ago. He used to deal with any money issues and she felt a bit lost.

"While we spoke, she admitted that she'd been feeling lonely most days, from around the time of her husband's diagnosis. She said, people don't understand how loneliness feels – it can't be dealt with just by leaving the house and talking to someone. She found it particularly hard going to places by herself, and even at the end of a busy day it was dispiriting to have no one to come home to.

"She tried to stay positive – she told me she'd created a daily routine that kept her mind busy and connected to the outside world. For example, she read a lot and made sure she always watched the news. She also kept in touch with old friends – even just the occasional phone call made a difference to how she felt.

"I told her about our telephone volunteers, and she liked the idea of having someone else she knew she could speak to regularly. She was quite happy to ring someone rather than have them ring her, so in the end she decided to sign up as a volunteer.

"She now has weekly phone calls with another woman who is caring for her husband. They both really value knowing they've got a conversation to look forward to, and being able to talk about their shared experiences of caring for someone close to them."

Our free advice guides

Our practical, jargon-free advice guides give you the information you need to get the most out of older age.

Advice for later life
Behind the wheel
Being winter wise
Care homes
Choosing where to live
Coping with bereavement
Dealing with depression
Getting help at home
How to find the right care home
If you're feeling lonely
Moneywise
Scamwise
Staying in control when you're older

To order your free advice guides, call 0800 319 6789 or visit independentage.org

The information in this guide applies to England only.

If you're in Wales, contact Age Cymru (0800 022 3444, agecymru.org.uk) for information and advice.

In Scotland, contact Age Scotland (0800 12 44 222, agescotland.org.uk).

In Northern Ireland, contact Age NI (0808 808 7575, ageni.org).

We want the UK to be the best place to grow older and we have ambitious targets to increase the number of older people we help and the difference we make. We receive no state funding and rely on income from individuals, trusts and other sources to continue providing our services to hundreds of thousands of older people in need.

Visit **independentage.org** to make a secure online donation and find out about other ways to support us. Alternatively, you can call us on **020 7605 4223** or email **supporters@independentage.org**.

About Independent Age

Whatever happens as we get older, we all want to remain independent and live life on our own terms. That's why, as well as offering regular friendly contact and a strong campaigning voice, Independent Age can provide you and your family with clear, free and impartial advice on the issues that matter: care and support, money and benefits, health and mobility.

A charity founded over 150 years ago, we're independent so you can be.

For more information, visit our website **independentage.org**

Speak to one of our advisers for free and confidential advice and information. Lines are open 8am-8pm Monday to Friday and 9am-1pm Saturday. Freephone **0800 319 6789** or email **advice@independentage.org**

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